

Service revamps civil rights office

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The Coast Guard Office of Civil Rights has retooled the way it handles complaints of discrimination after a blistering congressional critique this spring and a series of critical reports over the past decade.

Since April, the service has opened three regional offices, in addition to its main office at Coast Guard headquarters in Washington. One is collocated with the main office at Coast Guard headquarters; the others are in Portsmouth, Va., and Alameda, Calif.

These offices should help bring stability and standardization to the process, said Coast Guard Capt. Ekundayo Faux, OCR's new deputy director. Previously, problems were handled as a collateral duty by a service member or civilian where the complaint was filed.

Military members handled cases infrequently and did not develop expertise in the field, Faux said.

Faux, a 33-year veteran of the Coast Guard, sought out his position as his last tour before he retires. Despite problems with the reporting structure, the Coast Guard always has taken complaints of discrimination seriously, he said.

On July 20, the Coast Guard started the switch from 467 collateral-duty personnel to 67 full-time service providers. Most of the providers are civilian; about a dozen will be senior enlisted members. The transition should be finished Sept. 30.

New hires will have eight weeks of intensive training through the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute.

"Filling these positions was just one of several great strides that have been taken by the Coast Guard in recent months," Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., said in an e-mail. Cummings, chairman of the House Transportation Committee's Coast Guard and maritime transportation panel, said

April 1 that he was troubled by a Booz Allen Hamilton report detailing many of the same problems noted in other reviews dating back

nearly a decade.

The consulting firm, hired by the Coast Guard in September, stated that OCR employees did not have

the skills or training to handle the service's cases, and that formal discrimination complaints were not adequately processed.

Coast Guard civil rights issues gained national attention in July 2007, when a noose was left in the bag of a black cadet aboard the cutter Eagle. A second noose was found in the office of a white female officer conducting race relations training. □

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COMPLAINT COVERAGE

Discrimination complaints for the Coast Guard now will be handled by 67 full-time civil rights service providers in 14 zones and three regional offices, as well as at the Office of Civil Rights at Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington.

■ Washington regional office oversees four zones.

■ Portsmouth, Va., regional office oversees six zones.

■ Alameda, Calif., regional office oversees four zones.